

A CHAIR, A FLAGSTAFF, A WOMAN AND A ROW



MARIE ANTOINETTE CHAIR
In the storage room of the New York Historical Society with a card bearing this inscription: "This chair was part of the furniture of the Palace of Versailles in the apartments of the unfortunate Marie Antoinette, Queen of France. It was purchased by Gouverneur Morris, when United States Minister to France and presented by his widow May 6, 1817. This chair was used by Presidents of the Society, Lafayette occupying it in 1824."

FOREWORD

Next Tuesday evening the New York Historical Society—unless scheduled events go awry—will hold the most exciting meeting since the organization was founded in 1804.

A woman will furnish the excitement. Now, the officers and the executive committee of the New York Historical Society are not easily excited, inasmuch as they are very sedate and very dignified gentlemen. For more than one hundred and twelve years these gentlemen, or other gentlemen who, in respect to dignity and high social status, were their counterparts, have been holding meetings quietly and unperturbably. The most exciting themes discussed by them—or their counterparts of years gone by—in the last century and more have been annual dues, current expenses and incomes, with occasional interjections of sensationalism in the way of proffered gifts, such as Washington's camp bed or one of the many chairs he occupied during his first inauguration ceremony.

Since that first meeting of the society, which was attended by De Witt Clinton, Anthony Bleecker, Samuel Bayard and Peter G. Stuyvesant, and subsequent meetings attended by other distinguished gentlemen who had streets named after them, no such thrills as is promised for next Tuesday evening has been on the boards.

And the lady in the case?

Ah, yes, Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer, who, herself, belongs to a distinguished Knickerbocker family loomed large in the affairs of the very dignified and proper New York Historical Society.

Of course, you remember all about the start of it. There was a very dignified session, as usual, at the last meeting of the society, when—to use a phrase popular with descriptive writers of the Colonial period—like a bolt from the blue, Mrs. Van Rensselaer threw a hand grenade into the Family Dress Circle.

She said: "I hear on all sides that the society is dead. . . . Instead of an imposing edifice filled with treasures from old New York, what do we find? Only a deformed monstrosity filled with curiosities, ill arranged and badly assorted."

Even a society which, metaphorically speaking, has not flicked an eyebrow for these hundred years couldn't stand that, so next Tuesday a specially appointed committee will make a report on this specially spectacular session.

And Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer? She'll be there!

A DILAPIDATED chair caused the explosion. The chair is in the storage room in the basement of the New York Historical Society, and the fact that it is down there out of sight, but not out of mind, started all the trouble. You see, this particular chair was in the apartments of Marie Antoinette, in the Palace of Versailles. It was purchased by Gouverneur Morris when he was United States Minister to France, and was presented to the society in the name of his widow in 1817. One day Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer asked to see this chair. She was told it was in the basement.

This led to other queries. She expressed a desire to see the flagstaff of Fort Sumter, also presented to the society. That, too, was in the basement. And so it came about that Mrs. Van Rensselaer attended the meeting of the Historical Society to prove to it by its own testimony that it is dead and ought to be buried.

A Few Pointed Remarks on the Subject of "Old Lumber"

"Of course," said Mrs. Van Rensselaer the other afternoon in her home, in East Ninety-fifth Street, "I was naturally interested in the Marie Antoinette chair, as it was for a time in the possession of my grandfather, William Alexander Duer, who was a close friend of Gouverneur Morris. My grandfather had the mate to this chair, and there it is now." She pointed to a beautiful specimen of French cabinet work of the period, decorated in gold and old ivory, and artistically upholstered in silk tapestry. "That is one of the most cherished things in my house."

And she has a house filled with rare furniture, pictures and souvenirs from many lands and with many histories.

"Naturally I wondered," she continued, "why this chair of Marie Antoinette which was owned by such a distinguished New York gentleman as Gouverneur Morris was not considered worthy of a place of honor in the rooms of the New York Historical Society, but was put away with old lumber in the basement."

"But speaking of old lumber—that reminds me of the flagstaff of Fort Sumter. It was presented to my father, Archibald Gracie King, by Rear Admiral Dahlgren, and my father gave it to the Historical Society in 1897. When I asked at the society rooms what had become of the flagstaff I was told it also was down in the basement. Oh, they have a large cellar over there! I have been somewhat alarmed as to the fate of that flagstaff. Perhaps it has been chopped up for kindling wood. You know this is the identical flagstaff on

Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer Is Not Impressed with the New York Historical Society's Sense of Appreciation. The Society's Cellar, She Believes, Is No Fit Place for the Flagstaff of Fort Sumter, or a Chair from the Palace of Marie Antoinette. An Historical Society, She Thinks, Should Be Interested in History. Tuesday Will Tell

which floated the Confederate flag when Fort Sumter was silenced by Dahlgren in 1863. Perhaps I am mistaken, but I have an idea that that affair was quite an important episode in American history. It seems to me—but I may be mistaken—that the flagstaff of Fort Sumter is deserving of a place in the rooms of the New York Historical Society where visitors who are interested in history may see it. Of course, if the New York Historical Society is not interested in history that is a different matter. But I was always under the impression that it was organized for the purpose of creating an interest in history and preserving the relics of history in New York State and the United States."

Not Lack of Space, Quoth the Critic, but Lack of Appreciation

The original act of incorporation of the Historical Society reads:

"Whereas, the persons hereinafter named, and others, have formed themselves into an association under the name of 'The New York Historical Society,' for the purpose of discovering, procuring, and preserving whatever may relate to the natural, civil, literary, and ecclesiastical history of the United States in general, and of this state in particular, and have presented a petition to the Legislature to be incorporated, and that thereby such the purpose and design of the said society, may be the more effectually subverted and promoted."

Mrs. Van Rensselaer continued:

"When you ask them at the Historical Society where this important thing or that important thing may be, just as likely as not they will tell you it is in cold storage, and if you act at all surprised they will inform you that it is not on exhibition because of the lack of room. Now, I maintain that the whole difficulty is not a lack of space, but a lack of appreciation. Also it is a pure case of bad housekeeping. A good housekeeper and a good historian could change the whole situation over there."

"I have been told that a trunkful of old letters of historical value—many of them from Lafayette—was presented to the society and that an inquiry in regard to them failed to receive any satisfactory reply. I am informed that the gentleman making the inquiry was persistent, saying they had been deposited there, and was then told to call again in a week. When he called the next time he was told that such a trunk was there, but that it never had been opened, and if any one cared

to pay all the expenses it would be opened and the contents classified."

Mrs. Van Rensselaer paused for a moment. She looked about her in her cosy workshop on the second floor of her home. She sat before a wood fire in an old Franklin stove fitted into the fireplace. The embers cast a light upon her face, bringing out in strong relief against the falling shadows of the dusk the regular features, the distinctive lines of character and refinement and the snow-white hair. The open fireplace, the flare of the flames, the antique furniture made a Colonial setting. And there amid it all sat—with only a brief stretch of the imagination—a Colonial dame.

In these surroundings she does her literary work. Here she writes her books and magazine articles. She has written a number of books, among them "Crochet Lace," "The Devil's Picture Books," a history of playing-cards, "Van Rensselaers of the Manor," "The Goede Vrouw of Mana-ha-ta," "New Yorkers of the 19th Century," "History of Newport," and "Nonesuch Euchre and Other Games." Here she has her histories and here she checks up the history of the Historical Society.

Back of her on the side of the House of King and on the side of the House of Duer—for her descent is along both lines—are families reaching further than the days of Lexington and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Mrs. Van Rensselaer's father was

Archibald Gracie King. His grandmother was Mrs. Archibald Gracie, who was descended from Elizabeth Fitch, daughter of Colonial Governor Thomas Fitch of Connecticut.

"It was Governor Fitch," said Mrs. Van Rensselaer, "who stuck the feather in the cap of Colonel Thomas Fitch, brother of Elizabeth Fitch, and called it 'Macaronie.' This was in 1758. Colonel Fitch was marching with his troops to the Colonial Wars against the French and Indians, and from this incident Dr. Schuckburg wrote the famous song, 'Y a n k e e Doodle.'"

Mrs. Van Rensselaer stirred the logs in the fire and the flames mounted higher.

"It is not mere captious criticism that leads me to find fault with the New York Historical Society," she said, "I am entirely moved by a spirit of reform. I want to see the Historical Society live up to its original motive. I have a right to make these criticisms as I am a life member of the organization. I was made a life member in 1898 by my uncle, John Alsop King, who was president of the so-

ciety in 1887-1900. I am interested in history. The work of the City History Club occupies considerable of my attention. I have many of the children come here and we all study history together. We have small wax figures representing different characters in history and we go over the various scenes here in my home. Now, naturally I want these little members of the City History Club when they go to the New York Historical Society to get the right ideas of the history of the city.

Under Mayor Goldberg, the City Flag Will Be Hung Right

"I want them to see things that appertain to the history of the city and to the history of the nation. So anxious am I to have them get the right idea of history that I say to Irving Goldberg, who is very bright: 'Now, Irving, when you are Mayor of the City of New York I want you to promise me you will do one thing.' And firm in the belief that he will be Mayor of the City of New York, Irving is all attention. 'I want you to promise,' I say, 'that you will hang the flag of the City of New York right side up and not sideways as the city authorities hang it at present.' And Irving promptly answers: 'Yes, ma'am, I will.'"

"And then I explain to the children that the motto 'Orange Boven' means orange above, but that instead of placing the colors of the flag with the orange on top, the white next and the blue underneath, the flag flaunts from the City Hall with the orange to the left, the white next and the blue to the right. Of course they know that the reason for placing the orange above is due to the Prince of Orange, who came from the south of France, and when he joined his color with the Dutch flag of blue and white, he wanted to see the orange above."

A maid entered.

Mrs. Van Rensselaer Has Another Chair—But What's the Use?

"Please set at my place at the luncheon table the old Dutch chair," said Mrs. Van Rensselaer. "That chair," she explained, when the maid had gone, "belonged to a Dutch doctor, Hahns Kierstede, who wrote the first prescription in Nieu Amsterdam. He married a daughter of Anneke Jans—afterward Anneke Jans Bogardus, whose heirs claim all of the Trinity Church property along Broadway. I gladly would present that chair to the New York Historical Society—and other relics of the past equally as valuable—but—"

She smiled gently.

"—But—what's the use—they would probably put them all in that large cold storage plant in the basement."

Well, now, to be sure, everybody against whom charges are brought ought to have a chance to tell his side of the story. Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer charges that the New York Historical Society is dead. Let's give it a chance to prove an alibi.

"Is the New York Historical Society dead or alive?"

Unflatteringly this question was presented to the librarian of the organization, Robert Hendre Kelby, in the building at 77th Street and Central Park West.

"I claim we are alive," he said. "I know what you want—Mrs. Van Rensselaer's remarks have travelled wide."

"How about that Marie Antoinette chair that came from the Palace of Versailles?"

He opened a copy of "The New York Historical Society—1804-1904," written by himself, and pointed to the paragraph reading:

"On Sunday morning, February 3, 1849, the small chapel in the University Building, the floor below the rooms of



OLD DUTCH CHAIR

Which belonged to Dr. Hahns Kierstede who wrote the first prescription in Nieu Amsterdam. It is owned by Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer who says she would present it to the New York Historical Society if she were quite sure it would not be placed in the cold storage plant in the basement.

the society, was discovered to be on fire. The prompt exertions of the inmates of the building, and of the firemen who assembled as soon as the alarm was given, saved the library and collections of the society. During the excitement caused by the fire, the president's chair was thrown from the window and broken. This chair was purchased by Mr. Gouverneur Morris when Minister to France, at a sale of the contents of the Versailles."

"But where is the chair now?" was the query.

"It was mended and is now in the storage room in the basement," replied the librarian.

"And how about the flagstaff of Fort Sumter?"

"Oh, that's in the basement, too."

"Mrs. Van Rensselaer says you have a very large cellar."

"We have. But, you see, there are so many things here that we have not room for them all. Some of them have to go in storage. It is simply a case of the survival of the fittest."

"May I see the Marie Antoinette chair?"

"Certainly."

"And the flagstaff of Fort Sumter on which floated the Confederate flag?"

"Certainly."

The librarian could not find the chair, so a porter was called in and he located it with a lot of other material. It was a duplicate of the chair in Mrs. Van Rensselaer's drawing room, only the tapestry was in tatters and saturated with dust. The identification card was thrust in a slit in the tapestry at the back and fell out when the chair was removed from its hiding place.

The librarian had given orders and the porter brought out a long pole that was leaning against the wall.

"That is the flagstaff of Fort Sumter," said the librarian.

"And the trunkful of letters, including many from Lafayette?" asked the visitor.

"I don't know of any trunkful of Lafayette letters," said the librarian. "If there are any they are on file."

And then the procession moved upward without further exploration. In the meantime the members of the Historical Society are awaiting next Tuesday with bated breath.

And Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer? She'll be there!



FLAGSTAFF OF FORT SUMTER

It was presented to Archibald Gracie King, Mrs. Van Rensselaer's father, by Rear Admiral Dahlgren, who silenced Fort Sumter in 1863. Mr. King gave it to the New York Historical Society in 1897. It is now in the storage room of the society.